

Culture:

## Art. Because you're worth it.

By Elaine Wolff

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To the list of job descriptions you don't envy, consider adding "arts advocate." In the first five years of the 21st century, public funding for the arts declined precipitously at the federal, state, and local levels. San Antonio's Office of Cultural Affairs managed to maintain a steady, if relatively paltry, \$2-million budget for local cultural organizations and projects by cutting corners when necessary, while other cities suffered as much as a 50 percent reduction in funding.

Sounds like plenty of work for cultural lobbyists, you say, and two years ago author Richard Florida gave them some fresh ammunition: *The Rise of the Creative Class* persuasively argued that communities that want to be competitive in the new technology-driven global economy must attract "creative class" workers by offering them cityscapes rich in music, art, bicycle trails, and tolerance. New Haven, Connecticut Mayor John DeStefano encapsulated Florida's argument in a 2003 interview with *Back Stage* magazine: "So when you sum all this up, it suggests that not to invest in the arts is to undermine the infrastructure of the city, the infrastructure of the road that will take this city into the future."

San Antonio was among many municipalities that took Florida to heart, using his ideas as a template to craft The Cultural Collaborative, a blueprint for developing the city's cultural assets, the final draft of which goes before City Council this month [see "[Drum roll, please](#)," January 20-26, 2005]. TCC is built around what researchers call "instrumental" goals and results, portraying the arts as a means to an end. It is called "a plan for San Antonio's creative economy," which is defined as "the economic expression of the creative, or arts and cultural community." Among the benefits it promises to deliver in exchange for increased arts funding and support, are "desirable new jobs and businesses," "thriving cultural districts," and "expand[ed] cultural opportunities for young people."

But just as our local arts advocates are preparing to make their arguments before the Council, the Rand Corporation has released a new study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation that says governments should fund culture because 70 percent of Americans find it personally enriching, and they believe it sparks imagination. Furthermore, the report's authors say, economic arguments are dangerous because in most cities, the arts can't really compete as a financial engine against biotech, telecommunications, and auto manufacturing (or the porn industry, for that matter).



"An instrumental focus puts the cart before the horse," report author Kevin McCarthy said at a press conference February 15. The study, "Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts," incorporated a survey of 1200 U.S. households. It concludes that early, repeated exposure to the arts drives adult appreciation and participation, which in turn yields "spillover" public benefits such as a highly educated workforce and community identity and cohesion.

McCarthy concedes that Florida makes some interesting points, but he cautions arts advocates not to stretch his argument too far. "Critics say the benefits [of investing in the arts] are no better than if you build a highway."

Lately McCarthy isn't the only researcher turning a skeptical eye on Florida's manifesto. Joel Kotkin of Pepperdine University has pointed out that in 2003, Las Vegas and San Antonio were among the top big cities that experienced job growth, but neither ranked very high on Florida's index. Journalist Steven Malanga, writing in the Winter 2004 issue of *City Journal*, asked why the 10 cities Florida rated as least competitive and attractive increased their jobs base by 2 percent more than his Top 10 creative large cities.

Florida's argument rests on a very elastic definition of creative class workers that encompasses ad copywriters and copyright attorneys, cabinet-makers and programmers, architects and biotech researchers. This presents both danger and opportunity for arts supporters who want to use Florida as their champion for increased public support. On the one hand, the potential benefit is huge if tax dollars spent on theaters and art galleries can affect such a diverse range of industries. Then again, an anti-tax activist somewhere is bound to wonder whether medical engineers choose a city based on its art scene or on available research facilities. In its February 19 issue, *New Scientist* reports that during the past five years, more than 100 IT and science-based firms have located research and development labs in India, adding, "These are not drudge jobs: high-tech companies are coming to India to find innovators whose ideas will take the world by storm."

Not coincidentally, Florida, too, has turned his gaze to the international scene. Citing Sergey Brin, the Russian immigrant who co-founded Google, and Bangalore, India native Sabeer Bhatia who co-founded Hotmail, Florida echoes Stanford economist Paul Roemer's claim that innovative ideas are the true source of U.S. economic prowess. Florida is now sounding the alarm for a looming creativity crisis in post-9-11 America, where he says new immigration restrictions and politically motivated cuts in funding for medical innovations such as stem cell research are driving global talent to more welcoming shores, including India, Ireland, and Canada.

If it's not necessarily true that a thriving theater district and public art will bring more Toyotas and SBCs to town, asked one journalist at last Tuesday's Rand/Wallace press conference, why would politicians want to support increased funding when they're faced with infrastructure needs and traditional economic investment plans? "The public really wants these things," replied lead survey pollster John Russonello. "That's one reason policymakers might want to do it."

Following that logic, policymakers might also want to support more arts education. According to the Wallace-commissioned survey, 70 percent of Americans support more arts education in schools, a sentiment echoed somewhat more faintly in San Antonio, where more than 50 percent of adults contacted for the Cultural Collaborative Public Opinion Survey said it was "very important" for public schools to provide more art and music education.

OCA director Felix Padrón, who has been the main motivator behind the Cultural Collaborative, says that the Rand/Wallace report confirms that "we are on the right track." He observes that TCC, like "Gifts of the Muse," calls for increasing the demand for the arts as much or more than the supply of arts, especially developing new audiences for existing cultural opportunities. Padrón adds that he believes TCC's advantage is that it is one of the first cultural development plans in the country to incorporate an economic case as well as quality of life arguments.

What may matter most as City Council considers implementing the Cultural Collaborative is that no two cities are alike. Chicago, another city in which tourism is considered an important part of the local economy, incorporated its tourism program into its Cultural Affairs Department, which distributes \$1 million in grants annually (the major museums are funded separately, and don't compete for those dollars as they do here). "Arts and culture are, like, all the top things [tourists] come and do," the department's director of cultural planning told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In this area, San Antonio - where arts funding comes solely from the Hotel Occupancy Tax and arts organizations are pressured to meet the Convention and Visitors Bureau's agenda - does seem to have the cart before the horse. ●

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**A study released February 15 by the Rand Corporation reports that early, repeated exposure to the arts is the most important factor in adult involvement in and support for cultural activities. "Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts," recommends that policymakers focus on making family-oriented activities available to a wide audience. Here, artist Cruz Ortiz works with students at Artpace. (Photo by Mark Greenberg)**

